

# On the vine

## The Church and Racial Justice: On Acknowledging our History with Honesty and Repairing Tradition

*Bishop's Adviser on Minority Ethnic Concerns, the Revd Rachma Abbott writes:*

This morning (4th June 2021) Professor David Olusoga was on Radio 4 talking about the statue of the racist slaver Colston and its current placement in an exhibition in Bristol. Over the last few weeks there has been news about the Church of England considering its own presentation of its history in relation to racism and slavery in its historic monuments.

During the same season, the readings used in the worship of the Church have been focussed on the biblical book of Acts. Acts always offers a challenge to the practices of many of our churches in terms of how we behave and understand ourselves as Church.

One small example is in the opening verse of chapter 13.

*Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the ruler and Saul.*

This Turkish city (Antakya) was in the Roman province of Syria and is close to the border of modern Syria here the gatherings of those who were interested in the stories of Jesus first became known as Christians – they are already a church with leaders of a diversity few of us might expect in our own church.

Two men: Simeon, nicknamed to acknowledge his blackness and Lucius from Libya remind us that, after the destruction of Jerusalem, many of the Church's first great thinkers, movements and theologians came out of the African Church. The first convert from beyond the Jewish communities is the Ethiopian eunuch who worked for the Candace, the Ethiopian Queen and who is named in Christian tradition as the first Bishop of the church he founded in Ethiopia; there is the great theologian Augustine of Hippo and his mother Saint Monica, the monastic tradition of the desert fathers and so on.

Manaen, with his privileges of class and role is probably a type we recognise in our churches to this day, but he is named alongside Saul, that great missionary saint and letter writer of the early Church, and he made his living with his own hands as a tent maker. The list of those in leadership in this early church – teaching, prophesying, anointing and ordaining others for ministry is a diversity that in the Church of England we have failed to honour since. In other passages of Acts there are even some women in leadership – good news for me!

One of the challenges to the ways we are Church today is that while it is easy to make a case that slavery is an institution taken for granted in the bible, the same cannot be said in relation to ethnic discrimination and diversity.

The New Testament is a continued witness of a radical inclusion on ethnic grounds – Jesus' encounter with Greeks, with a Roman centurion, with the Samaritan woman at the well, the Canaanite woman (Matthew 15, in other gospels Syro-Phoenician) and perhaps most famously in the promise of Galatians 3:27-29.

*For all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.*

This makes it impossible to argue that racism within the Church was or is simply a matter of the prevailing historical culture. Followers of Jesus are called to the transformation of such culture in any case. The behaviour of the Church of England is deeply blemished in its own actions and reactions: for every John Newton there were several clergymen who sought reparations for the loss of slaves they had owned. There were even some among those based in the Caribbean, who sought to deny baptism to black people and slaves (something for which there was no biblical warrant) in part because there was an understanding that baptism acknowledged a shared humanity.

So how can we learn to look afresh at our memorials, statues, and history in the light of a genuine desire to repent of our sins against our brothers and sisters in terms of racism and slavery? What changes are we willing to consider to transform this history in line with the amazing grace of God's work in us?

If I'm honest, my first reaction was that I couldn't think of anything in the churches I serve that might need this kind of thought – and then the next Sunday as I walked into St Laurence's Hilmarton I saw the WW1 memorial window with its panel with Major-General Charles George Gordon (1833-1885) who was also known as Chinese Gordon and Gordon of Khartoum.

I realised that I knew almost nothing about him, including why he is memorialised in this church. Minimal research (Wikipedia was my friend here) meant that two matters struck me afresh – his links with Sudan, as this Diocese links with the Church in Sudan and South Sudan, and the focus we had given to marking the centenary of WW1 in 2018 here and across the Benefice ([see here](#) on Facebook).

The WW1 connection struck me because there were several people for whom family connection and memory did reach back 100 years, as was also shown in some of the images that Kate Slater [created for us](#). I have sometimes heard people suggest that slavery is 'too long ago' for people to have a connection to this history or to make reparations reasonable. I do not share



this view. The links to 100 years back were easily made by local village families and this made the outcome of the recent [Commonwealth War Graves Commission enquiry](#) into the failure to memorialise equally, amidst the continued service of Commonwealth soldiers at the MoD REME base in Lyneham, especially poignant.

It has also made me think about the links to Sir John Poynder-Dickson, first Baron of Islington, who was for two years Governor-General of New Zealand and has deep roots in this parish – a hamlet is named New Zealand and a village street is Poynder Place – and the almshouses and the church owe much to this family. So I have been profoundly reminded of the need to look at our fabric and artefacts with fresh eyes or with the help of others who will see from different perspectives.

Amidst all this was one of my enjoyable discoveries of lockdown: watching the Repair Shop – I delight in the skill and expertise of the crafts people, even when it's something that I can't imagine I would have ever valued or kept; for me that's often the ceramics, although I have a treasured china piggy bank with dark glue cracks from an earlier repair. Yet even when it's something I know I wouldn't have kept and treasured, especially not once it was broken there is delight in watching the repair and renewal alongside the story of why this item matters to this person or that family.

There is both careful and adept restoration and there is also, it seems to me value added in having the gifts of the crafts person involved in the repair – to know this now includes the gifts of a Will, a Stephen or a Kirsten in its renewal.

At its best this is what we do to tradition – when we discover that an aspect of it is broken, we repair it in a way that is honest in maintaining the patina of time and the story of connection and also acknowledges that sometimes things are broken beyond repair, and if they are to function, they have to be taken apart and completely new items have to be grafted in.

This is how I understand the Church of England's desire to acknowledge the injustice and brokenness of the history of objects within our buildings that were created on racist foundations – if we are honest about the realities of our failures, we are not denying the past but enabling either restoration or completely new beauties to become part of our tradition.

This may also be true for us about how we manage to hold together the challenges that can arise even from a shared experience like the pandemic – there will be both good things experienced and deep and painful loss – as we look back and see what was broken, we can find opportunities to repair and restore that weave together the golden strands of gratitude with space for the warping threads of loss into a tapestry of gathered community strength.